

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL INFORMATION SHEET

ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE

To control the spread of a communicable (infectious) disease, healthcare professionals and public health authorities rely on many strategies. Two of these strategies are isolation and quarantine. Both are common practices in public health and both aim to control exposure to infected and potentially infected individuals.

Isolation: For People Who Are Ill

Isolation is the separation of persons who have a specific infectious disease, and are infectious, from the general population to help prevent spread of this disease. Isolation may be voluntary or compelled on a mandatory basis through legal authority. People ordered into isolation may be cared for in their homes, hospitals, or in other healthcare settings.

Quarantine: For People Who Have Been Exposed But Are Not Ill

Quarantine is the separation and restriction of movements of persons who have been exposed to an infectious agent but are not yet ill. These individuals are potentially infectious and the quarantine is intended to stop the potential spread of the disease. Quarantine may be voluntary or compelled on a mandatory basis by legal authority and may be applied on an individual or group. Quarantine is usually enforced in a home setting but other facilities may also be utilized for quarantine.

Legal Authority For Isolation and Quarantine

Isolation and/or quarantine may be instituted by public health officials in the event of an outbreak of a disease dangerous to the public's health. "Police powers," or the authority of a government to enact laws and promote regulations to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of its citizens, authorize states to compel isolation and quarantine. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), in cooperation with local public health authorities, has the legal authority to enforce isolation and quarantine (as described in regulation 105 CMR 300.200).

Federal isolation and quarantine orders are issued through executive order of the President. Quarantinable diseases include: cholera, diphtheria, infectious tuberculosis, plague, smallpox, yellow fever and viral hemorrhagic fevers.

Isolation and quarantine may be used in combination with other public health measures to prevent and control the spread of diseases. Social distancing and community containment are ways to decrease contact with individuals who are infected or potentially infected. These measures might include the closing of schools, cancelling of public gatherings, avoiding crowds and working from home, and would be used primarily in a large-scale event, such as a flu pandemic.

